

## CAO VUONG (CAO BIEN)

### Introduction

After several centuries of weakened Chinese control over the south, first the Sui dynasty, then the great Tang unified China and brought the south back into the empire. Under the Tang, this region became known as the protectorate of the "Pacified South" (An-nan, or "peace-south"; Annam in Vietnamese) and flourished as part of the cosmopolitan empire.

By the ninth century, problems had begun to occur throughout the empire, and in Annam there were increasing troubles with mountain peoples to the west, up the Red River. In particular, the realm of Nanzhao on the southwest fringe of the Tang territory (in what is now Yunnan) joined with Tai mountain chieftains to oppose the lowland authority there.

When a Chinese official tried to double the price of salt traded for the valuable mountain goods, the chieftains rebelled and Nanzhao joined them in an invasion of the lowlands in the 860s. China sent an official, Cao Bien (known to later Vietnamese as Cao Vuong [King Cao]), to drive the invaders out and stabilize the Protectorate. This he did and, in doing so, involved himself memorably in local society and its spiritual powers.

### Document Selections with Questions

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### Cao Vuong (Cao Bien)<sup>1</sup>

Before he left An-nam, Kao P'ien ordered his bookkeepers to write down all that had been accomplished. The officials who supervised this program of public works further requested that their labors be commemorated with the erection of a stele. In 870, a tablet was set up in Kao P'ien's name with the following inscription:

*Heaven and earth arc boundless;  
Man's strength is but a trifle.  
Banish distress by bringing food;  
Prosperity comes riding in boats.  
Breaking free of this strange affair,  
Not just defeat but prolonged destruction,  
I devised plans against civil disorder,  
For excavating mountains and splitting rocks,*

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<sup>1</sup> This text uses the Wade-Giles Romanization of Cao Bien, Kao P'ien.

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*For meritoriously caring for those in need,  
Thus rousing the power of thunderbolts,  
Causing the sea to form a channel,  
Where boats can pass in safety,  
With the deep sea stretching out peacefully,  
A highway of supply for our city.  
The way of Heaven is the foundation of prosperity;  
The majesty of the spirits supports and maintains.* <sup>2</sup>

### Questions:

1. What duties did the Chinese official have to handle in this distant province of the Tang Empire of China?
2. What elements of the local economy appear in this inscription?
3. How did the material and the spiritual relate in this official's view?

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According to another tradition, P'ien was visited by the spirit of Cao Lo, the man who had constructed the crossbow with the turtle-claw trigger for King An Duong in the third century B.C. P'ien had heard that Lo was slandered by the Lac lords, who thereby obtained his execution; he asked the spirit why he was so hated by the Lac lords. Lo's reply reveals that he was an outsider of northern origin and, for that reason, was not tolerated. This association of P'ien with Lo and the nature of their conversation seem to express P'ien's own sense of his position as an outsider. P'ien commemorated his interview with Cao Lo by composing the following poem:

*The land of Giao Province is beautiful;  
So has it been from eternity.  
The worthy men of old extend their welcome;  
Then one is not ungrateful to the spirits.* <sup>3</sup>

This poem suggests that P'ien's interest in the scenery and cultural heritage of Vietnam was more than casual.

The tradition explaining P'ien's departure from Vietnam is also linked to the spirit world. One morning at the break of dawn, P'ien was strolling outside the gates of Dai-la. Pausing on the bank of the river, he stood gazing into the water. Suddenly a great wind arose, and the water erupted in billowing waves. The sky was darkened by clouds, and swirling mists covered the land. Then, P'ien saw an extraordinary man, more than twenty feet tall, standing on

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<sup>2</sup> Lê Tấn, *An-nam chí lược*. Hue, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Lý Tế Xuyên, *Việt Điện u linh tập*. Saigon, 1960.

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the water; the man wore a yellow robe and a purple hat, and held a gold document in his hand. P'ien was greatly alarmed at this apparition and decided to exorcise it.

That night as P'ien slept, the apparition appeared to him in a dream and said:

*Do not try to exorcise me. I am the spirit of the Dragon's Belly, first among the supernatural powers of this land; I heard that you came to build a city here and, since we had not yet met, I came to see you; if you resort to exorcism, I am not worried.*

In the independence period the term "Dragon's Belly" (*Long-do*) became synonymous with the capital city; it connoted the realm's spiritual center of gravity.

In spite of this warning, P'ien built an altar and arranged bronze and iron to exorcise the spirit. But the metals burned to ash in the midst of a violent thunderstorm. Seeing this, P'ien said:

*This place has a spirit with unusual powers; it will not be possible for me to remain here very long without meeting misfortune. I must return north as soon as possible.*

### Questions:

1. When a powerful Chinese figure came into this region, with what did he have to deal?
2. What role did such spirit cults play in local society?
3. How did Cao Bien (King Cao) deal with the spirit? And what did this mean for the local society?